

**Education Committee
Wednesday, March 15, 2023**

House Bill 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators - Support

Good day, Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Jennifer McLarney and I live and work in Tolland as a Paraeducator. I am here to offer testimony in support of HB 6881: An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators.

There has never been a better time for this committee to show its support for all Connecticut Paraeducators. By passing HB6881, you will show that our state is ready to invest in the vital role of its Paraeducators with support, compensation, and respect ensuring Paraeducators will earn a living wage, have lower healthcare costs, and ensure we are able to retire with dignity.

When I started working as a Paraeducator in 2011, my starting hourly pay rate was \$10.44, twelve years later the starting hourly wage in Tolland is \$15.05, \$.05 above minimum wage. It is my opinion that the starting pay is only that “high” because of the minimum wage legislation passed in recent years. \$15.05 is not a livable wage. A full-time Paraeducator on average works 30 hours a week. \$15.05 is roughly \$452/week. \$452 a week is not enough to cover living expenses for an individual, never mind being able to support a family. Passing HB 6881 would ensure that all Paraeducators would receive a minimum, livable salary. Paraeducators deserve a livable wage.

Paraeducators also need access to affordable quality healthcare. In Tolland, the percentage that a Paraeducator needs to contribute to be able to participate in the High Deductible/HSA Health plan is 17%. For a Paraeducator making \$15.05 an hour or \$452/wk that is \$77.00 of every paycheck going towards health insurance, but that’s not the only healthcare cost to Paraeducators. Keep in mind the offering is a high deductible plan, so there is a deductible that also needs to be met before all health costs are covered by the plan. While the BOE does fund 50% of that deductible, it is still a very high out-of-pocket expense for a Paraeducator making \$15.05/hr. The deductible for an individual is \$2000, 50% or \$1000 is the equivalent of almost a full month's pay. We pay 17% of our salary plus approximately an additional 1 month's pay for health insurance. We are 10-month employees, and we cannot file for unemployment in the summer. The passage of HB6881 would allow all paras in Connecticut to join the Municipal Employee Health Insurance Plan, which would

significantly reduce a Paraeducator's out-of-pocket healthcare expenses, increasing their take-home pay.

The only retirement option for me to participate in is a 403b, this is not a true pension. My contract also contains severance compensation. This severance that is received upon resignation or death is compensation for any accumulated sick leave up to 125 days, at \$10/day. That is not a typo: TEN DOLLARS a DAY - so the maximum amount is \$1250. By the way, we get 15 sick days a year so it would take 8+ years of working and not taking one sick day off to get the full amount of \$1250. HB 6881 would allow paras to have access to CMERS, the pension plan for municipal employees, and it is a REAL pension.

This testimony is only the very beginning of what I would like to tell you about being a Paraeducator, and how Paraeducators are vital to the success of our students and our schools. Passing this piece of legislation would benefit EVERY para and every school in Connecticut. Now is the time for this committee and all the members of the General Assembly to take immediate action to pass HB 6881, raise Paraeducator pay, lower our healthcare costs, ensure we have meaningful retirement benefits, and give us the tools we need to help Connecticut's students succeed.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today, please prioritize Connecticut Paraeducators by passing HB6881. By supporting paras you are supporting student learning across Connecticut.

Jennifer McLarney, Tolland Paraeducator